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The Banana Wars:

U.S. Occupation of Nicaragua and the effects Military Interventions

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History 300KK: America's Small Wars

28 November 2016

## Abstract

Military interventions can have many unknown consequences and can lead to other larger conflicts. Taking a look at just one intervention in detail, The U.S. Occupation of Nicaragua, and comparing it the reasons why an intervention may be needed and what happens when it does. From Nicaragua to Viet Nam and Afghanistan, to the Philippines and Iraq, military interventions can do as much harm as they can good. With a look at the people and places that make a conflict come together and grow. Opposition can arise from many places or shed light onto the original problem and show what else needs to be done in order for an intervention to become successful. People may not know what the consequences of an intervention may be, but they should always look at the reasons why it was deemed necessary and what happened to end it. Detailed here is a history of one such intervention and the comparisons with others.

## The Banana Wars:

### U.S. Occupation of Nicaragua and the effects of Military Interventions

No matter what the reason is for a military intervention, war and conflict have severe repercussions on people and governments. Trade and government stabilization have been a pretext for most of America's smaller conflicts. Whatever a person or government chooses to call it, war is always suffered by those closest to it, the hardest. Nicaragua in the early twentieth century was no exception to this fact. Trade and natural resources were taken from a nation through what some Nicaraguans thought were an unfair business relationship. War has come to be seen as a necessity, but to others it can create great havoc on the people and the land. One such intervention is detailed here with the effects of other conflicts in the history of the world.

### In the Beginning

Early in 1909, the Nicaraguan president, Jose Santos Zelaya, liberal government was coming under political attacks from the country's conservatives, led by Juan Jose' Estrada. Estrada's conservatives had been receiving political support from the United States with only one American navy ship patrolling off the coast to protect American lives and interests. Estrada's supporters were looking to overthrow the liberals in the government. In October of 1909, Estrada led a rebellion to overthrow by force, the liberal government. This rebellion led to the capture, indictment and execution of two Americans, Leonard Groce and Lee Roy Cannon in December 1909, which led to severed political relations with the United States and Zelaya's government. Lester D. Langley states, "Most Americans in eastern Nicaragua had bitter feelings toward Zelaya: his favored concessionaires, particularly the Bluefields Steamship Company, which had antagonized the banana planters in the region, had cut heavily into their business"

Plus Langley adds, “The American consul, Thomas Moffat, proved unfailingly helpful and was unabashedly pro rebel.”<sup>1</sup>

Estrada captured several small villages near the Costa Rican border and began to foment open rebellion in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua. These rebel operations caused the United States Navy to begin sending several naval vessels off the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts they had been patrolling the Mexican shores only a few hundred miles away. These ships included two cruisers, two gunboats, and several smaller auxiliary ships. Zelaya resigned on 14 December 1909 and his handpicked successor, Jose Madriz, was voted into office with a unanimous vote by the liberal Nicaraguan National Assembly on 20 December. The U.S. secretary of state, Philander C. Knox informed the new government that the U.S. would not resume normal diplomatic relations until Madriz could demonstrate a return to responsible government and would make restitution to American companies and citizens.

The United States Navy continued to patrol the waters around Nicaragua during the ongoing Estrada rebellion. However, by March of 1909, Estrada’s insurrection seemed to come to an end with a sudden increase in Madriz support. On 27 May 1910, Major General Smedley Butler returned off the coast with approximately 250 U.S. Marines from their new base in Panama, with Secretary of State Knox supporting the conservative efforts of Estrada’s insurgents. Major General Butler informed the Madriz government that were allowed to attack, “... but without firearms because they may hit North Americans.”<sup>2</sup> Estrada was allowed to keep

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<sup>1</sup> Langley, Lester D. *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> LaFeber, Walter. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993.

his weapons and to fight back.<sup>3</sup> In August of 1910, Estrada, with full United States recognition, became the new head of the Nicaraguan government.

### Mena's Rebellion and Dollar Diplomacy

Dollar Diplomacy involved American banks lending money to foreign governments and guaranteeing national debts in the region and undermining European investments in central American and Asia. This was instituted by the American government as part of an American plan to secure permission for the construction of a canal across the isthmus of Nicaragua. In 1912, the continuation of civil war between liberals and conservatives had begun to concern U.S. President William Howard Taft, due to the multitude of loans to the conservative government of Estrada. Estrada's minister of war, Luis Mena, forced Estrada to resign and he was replaced by the Nicaraguan Vice President Adolfo Diaz. "Adolfo Diaz was in Knox's estimation a 'good man'. The Nicaraguan leader wanted financial and political stability for his country."<sup>4</sup>

Nicaraguan nationalistic sentiments began to form with the Nicaraguan military and with Mena as well. Mena accused Diaz of selling the country away. When Diaz asked the United States for help, Mena's opposition turned into open rebellion. Mena asked the national assembly to declare him Diaz's successor and the United States refused to recognize this decision by the government. Liberal Nicaraguan General Benjamin Zeledon sided with Mena and established his headquarters in Granada.

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, in a 1930 autobiography, would later condemn these actions by the U.S. saying that they did more to destabilize the region instead of helping.

Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Langley, Lester D. *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983. 63.

President Diaz stated he could not guarantee American lives and property and asked for the assistance of the United States. In the first few weeks of August 1912 Zeledon's forces captured and several steamers owned by American companies and subjected the Nicaraguan capital to a four-hour bombardment. U.S. Minister to Nicaragua telegraphed Washington and asked for troops to help protect the U.S. diplomats and their families. In mid-1912, the *USS Annapolis* arrived off the Nicaraguan Pacific coast with 100 U.S. Marines and were followed shortly by the arrival of MG Butler and a contingent of 350 Marines from Panama. Admiral William Southerland of the United States Navy<sup>5</sup> and Colonel Joseph Pendleton of the United States Marine Corps<sup>6</sup>, arrived soon after with an additional 750 Marines and six naval support vessels with the intention of protecting the U.S. legation and retaking and securing the vital American owned railroads from Corinto to the capital of Managua.

#### Intervention of 1912

On 30 August 1912, U.S. Marines landed and took up positions near the American consulate, and with the additional Marines from Pendleton's regiment, the United States now had more than 1200 Marines in Nicaragua. Assistant Secretary of State Huntington Wilson, argued that the U.S. Army should also be deployed, but navy and army commanders stated that the marines already in the area were capable of taking care of the problems in Nicaragua. After being ambushed on September 19<sup>th</sup><sup>7</sup>, two battalions of Marines, along with a battery of artillery, marched on Mena's positions in Granada and forced him to surrender his 700 rebels. Mena himself was deported to Panama by the new government. Between September 27<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> USN

<sup>6</sup> USMC

<sup>7</sup> This resulted in the only Marines to be killed in action in 1912.

and October 1<sup>st</sup> Nicaraguan forces bombarded positions held by troops loyal to Zeledon. On October 2<sup>nd</sup> a message was sent to Zeledon calling on him to surrender. Zeledon refused. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 850 Marines and a battalion of Bluejackets<sup>8</sup>, stormed the hills around Zeledon's forces and captured artillery that was then used on Zeledon's on troops and forced them to retreat. Zeledon and most of his troops were destroyed the next day by Nicaraguan military forces. On October 6<sup>th</sup> 1912, 1,000 bluejackets and marines captured and occupied the city of Leon, Nicaragua. Diaz's rebellion was over and all but 100 marines withdrew from Nicaragua. These 100 Marines were to stay in place as a legation guard and a patrolling police force in the country until withdrawn in 1926.

#### Augusto Cesar Sandino

Born into a well to do liberal family in Nicaragua May 18, 1895, Augusto Cesar Sandino was the illegitimate son of Gregorio Sandino and servant woman from the Sandino family. Augusto Sandino lived with his mother until the age of nine and then was taken into his father's care who then started to provide for his young son's education. When he was seventeen, he was a witness to the U.S. Intervention in 1912. At the age of 26, Sandino was involved in an altercation with another man (who happened to be a conservative in his village) after the other man made rude comments about his mother. Sandino assaulted and then tried to kill the other man and fled to Honduras, Guatemala, and then Mexico. In Mexico he became involved in the revolutionary spirit forming in Mexico that encouraged a heritage of Latin American culture. He returned to Nicaragua in 1926 since he could no longer be prosecuted for his previous crime in

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<sup>8</sup> A term used by U.S. Marines to describe U.S. sailors in the early Twentieth Century because of their distinctive blue uniforms worn aboard ship.



1921.<sup>9</sup> When another war in Nicaragua began between the liberals and the conservatives, called The Constitutionalist War, Sandino began to emerge as a guerrilla leader for the liberal rebels.

After the U.S. Marines left in 1926, Nicaraguan General Emiliano Chamorro made an attempt at a coup to return Adolfo Diaz to power, but the coup failed to garner U.S. support. During Diaz's second term as president in 1926, another liberal revolt began. As the liberals again seized power, the United States stepped in again and forced both parties to accept the Espino Negro Accord. In this accord, it was agreed that the U.S. would stay in the country and supervise the 1928 elections when Diaz's term as president expired and would help to create a national police force composed of both liberals and conservatives.

Sandino rejected this accord and created a band of followers and attacked a conservative compound but the attack failed and he was repulsed. In 1927, Sandino began to recruit peasants from local villages and attacked government forces with increasing success. With the liberal army receiving increasing supplies and weapons from Mexico, General Moncado, the liberal army's commander, was on the threshold of seizing the capital. Only the threat of military intervention from the U.S. forced the liberals to agree to and obey a ceasefire agreement.

#### Sandino's Rebellion

Sandino refused to obey the new Espino Negro Pact and would not order his followers to surrender their weapons. Sandino condemned the government for signing and agreeing to this new accord and in July of 1927 he and forces attacked a patrolling group of U.S. Marines and Nicaraguan National Guardsmen.<sup>10</sup> Sandino continued to fight for Sarcasa, whom he thought had the rightful claim to the presidency. "In American eyes he was now not only a rebel but an

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<sup>9</sup> With the Statute of Limitations on that crime expired.

<sup>10</sup> Newly created under the Espino Negro Pact.

intransigent politico. His cause, as Secretary of State Frank Kellogg believed, was part of the Bolshevik conspiracy.”<sup>11</sup> Near the end of July, Sandino attempted to lay siege to a Marine outpost but repulsed by dive bombing aircraft from the U.S. Navy.<sup>12</sup> Despite heavy losses, Sandino again attempted to besiege another Marine garrison and was again repulsed. Marines continued to patrol and attempted to capture Sandino but when they found Sandino’s mountain outpost, it was guarded only by straw mannequins and had been abandoned sometime before.

Throughout the rest of 1927 and into 1928, Sandino continued to raid and evade the Marines and Nicaraguan National Guardsmen. The Marines never captured Sandino but did manage to find his mother and convince her to write a letter to him and beg him to give up the fight. By this time, American sentiment was turning against the intervention and the use of U.S. forces in Nicaragua and began to believe in his movement. Sandino left Nicaragua in 1929 and returned to Mexico, but his radical ideals were not welcome by the Mexican government and he was deported back to Nicaragua in 1930. Sandino was assassinated in February 1934 by National Guardsmen, along with his brother and two of his generals.

#### Good Neighbor Policy

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the United States found it could no longer support military interventions in Latin America and began to recall of its troops from the region. In 1933, all U.S. military forces were withdrawn from Nicaragua. Franklin D. Roosevelt felt that this new policy of non-interference in Latin America would bolster trade opportunities in the future. However, this new policy of not intervening militarily was due more because the

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<sup>11</sup> Langley, Lester. *The United States and the Caribbean 1900-1970*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980. 119.

<sup>12</sup> One of the first dive bombing attempts in history.

United States had to focus on domestic affairs and not the affairs of other countries simply because they could not afford to do so.

### Bananas and Trade

The United Fruit Company<sup>13</sup> was a fruit company that dominated the early Banana trade in Central America. Although it competed heavily with the Standard Fruit Company<sup>14</sup> it maintained a monopoly on the banana growing plantations in places such as Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. It was founded in 1899 through a merger of the Boston Fruit Company and Minor C. Keith's banana trading concerns. In 1970 it was transformed into the United Brands Company. In creating a thriving Banana plantation, the company had to clear substantial amounts of rainforest and created a problem with the local environment. Labor was supplied by indigenous peoples who were mostly paid very little and had little land in which to grow their own crops because of the large plantations. This element of almost slavery caused more and more indigenous people to become disenfranchised with the local government for allowing these places to exist and allowed for rebels, like Sandino, to be able to recruit more forces and garner more support from local workers. Several strikes were implemented with little effect and sometimes ended with local government troops firing into the crowd of strikers to drive them off. Though the Banana trade is lucrative on the global market, it is costly to the environment with the destruction of local economies and creates massive deforestation.

Intervention was deemed necessary by banks in the U.S. and the U.S. government in Nicaragua because of the Standard Fruit Company and American owned railroads that brought the produce to the ports for shipment to New Orleans, where the company had offloaded its

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<sup>13</sup> Today known as Chiquita Brands International.

<sup>14</sup> Known today as Dole Food Company.

products. When Nicaragua erupted in ongoing conflicts between the liberals and conservatives, these plantations and railroads often came under attack and held up shipments of the valuable produce. The Owners of Standard Fruit appealed to the United States Government to intervene and bring a stabilizing force to the country and to the government.

### Trade and Conflict

Two of the most fought over items in history have been land and trade. European powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fought over trade in North America, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Sub-Continent. In the nineteenth century they would engage in trade disputes in Asia and the western Pacific. Romans and Carthaginians fought over land that was suitable for the growing of grape vines for wine. Later nations would fight over trade routes and who they could trade with. Conflict is an aspect, that in the western world, most people will never know. In other areas of the world such as Africa, Central and South America, and Asia, war over trade is a constant in life. In modern times, nations have gone from fighting over bananas and pineapples to fighting over the resources of war, such as oil, steel, and iron. When the Japanese began to expand their empire in the very late nineteenth Century, they looked in all directions for areas that they could obtain natural resources. The Philippines had an abundance of rubber trees and living space for Japanese colonists. When Japan was given a League of Nations mandate over Saipan and Tinian at the end of World War II, it began to strip the land of its resources and leave the native inhabitants with virtually nothing. As a nation expands, its cravings for resources doubles and triples over time to accommodate the new areas and even larger populations, sometimes to the detriment of the local who have settled there. In the American west, land was taken from the Native Americans because it was suited to farming or had precious metals such as silver and gold and the Native Americans were forced onto lands

that had very little to subsist off. The Indians of North America were removed from their buffalo hunting grounds in which they used for food, clothing and shelter. Trade and expansion claim lives and natural resources at an abundant rate. History has shown when an indigenous population no longer has what they need that they may come to believe that the only way for a better is to bear arms and rebel against those whom they see are oppressing them and causing them to suffer.

In the case in Nicaragua, Sandino was able to recruit seemingly easily in the remote villages and near the major plantations because he was able to show the locals what the outsiders, railroad and plantation owners, were doing to them and their country. He was able to see that the economy was in disarray as was the government. Even Americans during the second intervention came to believe in Sandino and his rebels. Augusto Cesar Sandino is now considered a hero in Nicaragua and even has an airport named for him. The Soviet Union and the South American branch of the Comintern spoke out in support of the Sandinistas. In China, a military unit of the Kuomintang Army<sup>15</sup> was named "The Sandino Brigade".<sup>16</sup>

#### U.S. Military Interventions Around the World

During the Twentieth Century, the United States began to become a major power in the world socially, economically, politically, and militarily. At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, the U.S. gained territories from Spain around the world. These territories included Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, making the U.S. a global power. With these new territorial gains came new problems for the young republic to manage. An insurrection began in The Philippines and had to be put down and a new government needed to be installed.

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<sup>15</sup> Nationalist Party of China. Today it is part of Taiwan.

<sup>16</sup> Grossman, "Solidarity with Sandino: The Anti-Intervention and Solidarity Movements in the United States"

Though America had had plenty of experience in fighting guerrilla wars, it had not listened to the lessons learned in the Indian Wars within its own borders. Lessons in fighting an insurgency had to be relearned. As Cincinnatus states in his book “Even the common reference to ‘Unconventional warfare’ indicated the attitude of army brass toward wars of national liberation. Much of the army tended to pay as little attention as possible to guerrilla warfare, paying it only lip service.”<sup>17</sup> Tactics had to be redeveloped to train for and fight that insurgency in an environment vastly different from the plains of the Midwest United States.

Fighting in a jungle environment was new to soldiers, marines, and sailors alike. The bases had to be carved from the jungle, destroying more forests in the process and using local peoples to help build the new bases and ports. After these areas were cleared of trees, American investors would immediately come in and began setting up new plantations for things such as pineapples and rubber trees. This again took areas from indigenous people who relied on those areas to grow crops and build homes. As these people would lose more and more of their livelihood and their own country they could become restless and want to resist foreign encroachment on lands that in some cases had been used for generations of the same family.

This scenario acts as dominoes in lands where military interventions and occupations come to dominate everyday life. One domino falls and then another until an insurrection or rebellion is begun. When a nation’s government no longer listens to them or the people believe they no longer are valued by that government, people will rise up. Maybe they come to open rebellion because they are not being listened to or they believe that the only way for them to get ahead in life and have enough for food and shelter is to arm themselves and throw off the foreign

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<sup>17</sup> Cincinnatus. *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam War*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1981. 50.

influences in their government. Sandino was able to show a large enough portion of the population in Nicaragua that change had to come and it had to come from the end of a rifle.

History has shown the world that when people feel trapped they will act upon survival instincts to rescue themselves and to secure a better future. Rubenstein says in his book, “Of all the reasons used to mobilize people for war, the most common claim, the one with the strongest visceral appeal, is self-defense.”<sup>18</sup> Sometimes that government is for the better and sometimes it can be even more detrimental over time. When Czarist Russia refused to listen to the needs of its people, the Romanov Dynasty was killed and a civil war erupted, leading to the creation of the Soviet Union and the rise of Josef Stalin. Stalin would eventually kill almost 31 million of his own people of many different purges throughout his reign. The French Revolution was begun when the ruling nobility would not look towards the safety and living situations of the common Frenchman and the king of France was beheaded. These events lead to the Reign of Terror where Frenchman were beheaded for even the smallest of infractions, killing thousands. The American War for Independence began because some colonists believed that they were being taxed into poverty and needed representation in the British Parliament. Rebellions can begin in any number of ways and can lead to the unnecessary deaths of innocents.

The United States have become involved in conflicts all over the globe, especially when it comes to securing loans made by banks or investors or over natural resources. Sometimes the language for war states that it is necessary to intervene to secure a stable government and to stabilize a particular region of the world. When the United States intervened in the Vietnam War, it was attempt to bolster an ally. However, that government was corrupt and subsequent

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<sup>18</sup> Rubenstein, Richard E. *Reasons to Kill: Why Americans Choose War*. New York: Bloomsbury Press. 2010. 29.

governments were also seen as corrupt, leading many South Vietnamese to look towards the communist north and the Viet Cong. Intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan have also created their own problems. Al Qaeda in Iraq has turned into ISIS<sup>19</sup> which has spread the fighting to a large area in the Middle East. The U.S. Invasion of Iraq in March 2003, destabilized the Middle East Region and has thrown several neighboring countries into conflict. Afghanistan is an ongoing conflict with no clear end in sight. Although Afghanistan was invaded to capture a dangerous terrorist, the invasion has destabilized the country and caused their neighbor Pakistan to erupt in more fighting within its own borders and with its neighbor India over the Kashmir region.

Military intervention in another country's affairs can be billed as deterrent to further escalation of conflict, but that intervention may have unknown that can and will cause hardship to fall on the ones who are not in power and can cause the locals to rise up and fight against what they originally thought was an effort to assist them. Those people who have never had to see war up close, do not know the ruin that can come to place or resources that they have fought over. War in any form can harm more than it helps in the long run and when the forces of the intervening country return home it is up the common people of the invaded country to pick up the pieces and reestablish a government, economy and social well-being.

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<sup>19</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and Syria



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